

Mayor's Report—February 14, 2022

1. FEMA Dec 2020 flood disaster recovery funding. With the vital work of City Administrator Tom Williams, we are closing in on our first FEMA reimbursement for the debris removal portion of the recovery work. The FEMA team is also forwarding to their payment section our cost-recovery application for the repair portions of the work. We are grateful for the FEMA team's hard work on our behalf. I hope to recycle FEMA funding we receive to make more flood mitigation improvements in Gustavus, but perhaps to also put some of the return in a budget line specifically for immediate emergency disaster response. I will have a recommendation on that for the council soon.

2. FEMA mitigation Funding to position Gustavus to resist future flood events. This funding is available for projects to prevent future flood damage. We are working with the State Homeland Security Department to plan for a FEMA-funded hydrology study as the first phase of a series of mitigation projects for FEMA flood mitigation-specific funding. The hydrology study is a prerequisite for ditch and culvert projects. We plan for the study to cover all of Gustavus east of the Good River, which will cover the major drainage problem areas. The study will help enable some projects already in planning and will inform future subdivision design and road construction planning.

3. Grandpa's Farm Road Bridge. Five years ago, we planned a project as part of our Gustavus Fish Passage Improvements to replace the perched culvert that carries Harry Hall Creek under Grandpa's Farm Road. US Fish and Wildlife Service funded the design but lost the funding for construction. Since then, we have been looking for funding sources to finish the project. Last summer Dowl Engineering rechecked the plans and give us an updated engineer's cost estimate. I have been working with Andy Stevens at US FWS in Anchorage to promote the project.

Great news: Andy was successful in achieving approval at that Alaska Regional level to fund our project in full without a City match. The funding source is the bipartisan infrastructure act, which our Alaska delegation supported. I am grateful to the delegation for that support and to the US FWS for prioritizing our project. Because President Biden wants to see progress on infrastructure projects, the Service was looking for qualifying shovel-ready projects that could be constructed in 2022. I committed that if funded, we would construct it this summer. (It is an offer we can't refuse!) The Regional office recommendation has been forwarded to the national level and we expect funding to be confirmed. Final verbal approval from that level should be confirmed very soon. The manufacturer of the bridge kit committed to getting the bridge to us within 3-4 months of their Notice to Proceed. On that schedule, we should be able to construct in July. Construction will take about a week. I am asking the Council to approve posting the Invitation to Bid as early as next week, pending verbal confirmation of funding. I'd like to award the contract at the March meeting to keep us on schedule. However, I won't ask to award until we have iron-clad confirmation of the funding for the project.

4. Other Capital Projects. We have a long wish-list of capital projects approved in past councils. We have worked that list in an organized and prioritized manner. Tom and I are taking a new look at it to identify projects we should prioritize and actively work to completion. I expect we will have a group of projects that are already funded, plus another group for which we are seeking funding. We will work to construct the projects that are funded according to their priorities, while we seek funding for others of highest priority.

Never before have we had such an opportunity to fund infrastructure projects as now with the bipartisan infrastructure act. Our challenges are to prioritize our projects, plan and design them, identify and apply for funding, and then implement contracting for those projects. Absent a department of public works, it's daunting. We are grateful for assistance from the Alaska Municipal League (AML), which is gathering and organizing information on funding opportunities and communicating those opportunities to municipalities. AML is recommending to the State Legislature a CIP fund program specifically to provide non-federal match for municipalities. That would leverage State funds to capture major funding for small communities like ours challenged by match requirements.

Tom is looking into grant-writing assistance available through AML. We might contract grant writer who earns their pay from the grants received. Federal funds may be available for projects like road drainage and flood control improvements, a wave energy barrier at the float system, a bike/pedestrian trail, septage handling system, emergency response apparatus, DRC buildings, library expansion, and more.

5. Pandemic mitigation. The council received my required monthly risk at the work session. I am happy to make the full 5-page risk assessment available to anyone interested, but the conclusions on the last page are as follows:

I recommend that the mask-wearing requirements for indoors in City facilities be continued through February per Resolution CY 22-01. But trends are good. I will offer an updated risk assessment and recommendation in March.

The state and regional Alert Levels remain High. Hospitalizations are still high, and hospitals stressed. Omicron variant cases have been much less severe than Delta cases. Nevertheless, the virus is still killing Alaskans, with a heavy proportion of deaths being among unvaccinated adults. We have had a cluster of local cases, all travel-related or limited spread within the "travel bubble" in the last month, but there has not been community-wide spread of infection. Vaccination rates continue to rise, but very slowly. The percentage of vaccinated people in our census area is relatively high. Some Alaskans, including some Gustavus residents, will never choose to be vaccinated.

There is encouraging news: the current surge appears to have peaked in Alaska. Case numbers are falling, and the transmission factor has dropped below 1.0. Fatalities continue to occur and are a lagging indicator of the pandemic. In Juneau masking is required indoors in public spaces. In the Lower 48 masking is the common expectation indoors and, in some places, even outdoors in crowded locations.

I participated in the CoG employee staff meeting on Thursday Feb 3. I can report that the staff unanimously supports and requests continuing the masking requirements indoors in City facilities as set forth in Resolution CY22-01 at this time.

The present case and transmission rate trends if continued may soon justify a conclusion that mask-wearing indoors in City facilities may become optional. Recent public health news suggests the pandemic may fade as most of the population becomes relatively immune or resistant due to vaccination, prior infection, or both. At that point the virus won't disappear but will more likely become endemic, i.e., predictable, and stable with low transmission and case rates. Even though the virus becomes endemic, it will remain a dangerous threat to a portion of the population at higher medical risk. Those people will need to take extra precautions than most of the populace.

Masks provide two-way protection to reduce transmission in the populace. They control broadcasting of virus from a masked, infected person, and they protect an uninfected person from inhaling virus particles broadcast near them. During high transmission periods two-way protection is essential to “flattening the curve.”

But, under endemic conditions with lower transmission rates and when the population has achieved general immunity, it is reasonable to rely primarily on vaccination for everyone and apply one-way mask protection for those people at special risk. Those vulnerable folks should choose high quality N95 or Kn95 masks to insure the best personal protection. I hope we can get to at least that level soon. Until then, I ask all to remain patient as we do our best to keep our staff, volunteers, and public members safe and comfortable as they use our indoor facilities.

6. Beach Park Updated CRMA. DNR has not yet given their final approval of the updated CRMA we negotiated with them, but I expect to get it soon. I hope to have it on the March agenda for public hearing and council approval.

7. Roads. Thanks to Glacier Bay Construction for their strong and effective effort to push out berms and clear intersections this past week to improve traffic flow, sight distance at intersections, and to move as much snow off the roads as possible before break-up. They have made a big improvement for us. With six weeks of winter yet to go and one atmospheric river after another, we can expect challenging road conditions for the next couple months.